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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC//DHO-2/REA/NMJIC-J2//
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000324

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (PERRY); H (MARK SMITH) FOR CONGRESSMAN
HOEKSTRA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CONGRESSMAN PETER HOEKSTRA'S VISIT
TO ASHGABAT

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle
accordingly. Not for public Internet.

Summary

12. (SBU) Embassy Ashgabat warmly welcomes Congressman
Hoekstra to Turkmenistan as the first visiting member of the
United States Congress since 2002. Your visit helps to
underscore the progress made by the United States since
December 2006 in "turning a new page" in its relationship
with Turkmenistan. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan remains enmeshed
in an internal battle of emollients versus irritants.
Government officials are learning to say the right things,
but their actions are not always consistent with their words.
Although the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, is
making significant changes in some sectors, enormous
challenges remain, and it is important to realize the country
is at the very beginning of a new era. The wreck of a
country left behind by the now-deceased President-for-Life,
Niyazov, combined with 70 years of colonial Soviet rule,
compounded by nomadic/tribal customs and lack of a
nation-state concept, create the need for a new model.
Turkmenistan was never North Korea, but it is not yet
Denmark. Rather, the current state offers a rare opportunity
to develop a new model; a model molded by, and representative
of, the proud people of Turkmenistan, with patient but
consistent nudges by the international community. End
Summary.

Introduction

13. (SBU) Turkmenistan is a hydrocarbon-rich state that
shares borders with Afghanistan and Iran. You will find
Turkmenistan in the midst of an historic political
transition: the unexpected death of President Niyazov on
December 21, 2006, ended the authoritarian, one-man
dictatorship that for 15 years made Turkmenistan among the
most repressive among the former Soviet republics. The
peaceful transfer of power following Niyazov's death
confounded many who had predicted instability because of the
former president's open-ended succession scenario. His

successor, President Berdimuhammedov, quickly assumed power following Niyazov's death with the assistance of the "power ministries" -- including the Ministries of National Security and Defense -- but his position was, in fact, subsequently confirmed through a public election in which the population eagerly participated, even if it did not meet international standards.

14. (SBU) Since his inauguration on February 14, Berdimuhammedov has cautiously started moderating Niyazov's cult of personality: although you will still see pictures of the deceased president on all major buildings and references to Niyazov's literary works, especially the "Ruhnama," scattered on signs around the city, the new president has banned the huge stadium gatherings and requirement for students and government workers to line the streets, often for hours, along presidential motorcade routes. Berdimuhammedov still pays lip service to maintaining his predecessor's policies, but he has started reversing many of the most destructive, especially in the areas of education, health and social welfare. Turkmenistan's People's Council is expected to make additional changes -- to the troubled agriculture sector -- during a March 30 special session. And, although the president has been slower to strengthen the rule of law, correct Turkmenistan's abysmal human rights record, and promote economic reform, he has told U.S. officials he wants to "turn the page" on the bilateral relationship and is willing to work on areas that hindered improved relations under Niyazov. The government says it is eager to work with the UN, OSCE, and other partners to learn how to meet international standards.

U.S. Policy in Turkmenistan

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15. (SBU) U.S. policy in Turkmenistan is five-fold:

- Encourage democratic reform and increased respect for human rights;
- Encourage economic reform and growth of a market economy and private-sector agriculture;
- Support efforts to restore Turkmenistan's education and health systems;
- Encourage greater Turkmenistan participation in regional initiatives, including diversification of Turkmenistan's energy export options;
- Promote security cooperation.

Berdimuhammedov remains closely tied to Niyazov-era interest groups focused on self-preservation. Although security cooperation continues to improve and the government has welcomed assistance in education, health and agriculture, many of the democratic and economic reforms the U.S. government promotes are viewed as challenges to the regime's existence. In the short term, the U.S. government is linking better bilateral relations and assistance in the areas where the regime wants development to gradual democratic and economic reform. For the longer term, the embassy is focusing on preparing the next generation of leaders and society in general with tools to build a more democratic, secure and prosperous nation.

16. (SBU) Turkmenistan remains a tempting target for increased cooperation on energy and security, but its past human rights record makes this cooperation problematic. In raising its human rights concerns, the United States is focusing on three areas:

- Freedom of Movement: Turkmenistan maintains a travel restriction list ("black list") of individuals not allowed to leave or, in some cases, to travel within the country. Most of the restricted travelers have an immediate or extended family member implicated in the November 2002 alleged assassination attempt against President Niyazov. The United

States is focusing its efforts on calling for: 1) a clear and transparent process for placing a citizen's name on the restricted travel list; 2) notification to the citizen prior to his/her attempt to travel; and 3) the establishment of a process for removal from the list.

-- Religious Freedom/Country of Particular Concern: Although Turkmenistan has improved its religious freedom record during the past two years, some groups have still been unable to register (a requirement for legal religious activity), and most groups report that they continue to have difficulties importing religious literature (other than the Bible or the Koran). Unregistered groups continue to experience police harassment, albeit on a much lesser scale than previously. Finally, though minority religious groups receive the lion's share of international religious freedom groups' attention, the Niyazov regime's direct attack on Islam (in fact, making worship of Niyazov and the Ruhnama the state religion) are also a matter of serious concern.

-- Civil Society Group Registration: Since the 2003 law that required all registered NGOs to re-register, very few independent NGOs have been registered by the Ministry of Justice. The embassy has determined that fewer than ten independent civil society groups have received NGO registration under the new law. Even after registration, however, NGOs continue to have problems, including monitoring of their activities. The embassy has provided legal consultations on registration issues to civil society groups wanting to register, but ultimately the law on registration of organizations will probably need to be reformed.

Foreign Policy

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17. (SBU) Notwithstanding his statements that he plans to continue the neutrality policies of his predecessor, Berdimuhammedov -- probably at the advice of Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov -- has put a virtually unprecedented emphasis on foreign affairs. Indeed, Berdimuhammedov has met or spoken telephonically with all the leaders in the region -- including with President Aliyev of Azerbaijan, with whom Niyazov maintained a running feud -- and agreed to visits. He has also held very positive meetings with two U.S. State Department officials and leaders of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and United Nations to discuss areas of potential assistance, and has agreed to visits by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights in May and to a visit by the UN's Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom at an as-yet undetermined date.

Security Cooperation

18. (SBU) Turkmenistan continues to occupy a strategic location in the Global War on Terrorism. Niyazov's UN-endorsed policy of "positive neutrality" kept Turkmenistan at arm's length from Russian military encumbrances -- and from Iranian maneuvering; Niyazov used his minimal security relationship with the United States to show his "independence" from Moscow. Turkmenistan remains an important conduit for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, and maintenance of overflights and the military refueling operation at Ashgabat Airport remains a key embassy goal.

Gas Games

19. (SBU) Turkmenistan has world-class natural gas reserves, but Russia's monopoly of its energy exports has left Turkmenistan receiving less than the world price and overly beholden to Russia. Pipeline diversification, including both

a pipeline to China proposed for 2009 and the possibility of resurrecting plans for a Trans-Caspian pipeline that would avoid the Russian routes, and construction of high-power electricity lines to transport excess energy to Turkmenistan's neighbors, including Afghanistan, would not only enhance Turkmenistan's economic and political sovereignty, but also help fuel new levels of prosperity throughout the region. Berdimuhammedov recognizes the need for more options and has taken the first steps to this end, but he will require encouragement and assistance from the international community if he is to maintain course in the face of almost certain Russian efforts to keep Turkmenistan from weaning itself away from Russia.

¶10. (U) Team Ashgabat looks forward to your visit and thanks you for coming to Turkmenistan.

HOAGLAND